


## Chapter 3

# An Affordance Perspective on the Enabling and Disruptive Effects of Social Media Tools on Self-Management of Chronic Illness

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines the appropriation of social media tools by chronically ill adults to better understand and manage their illness using an affordance perspective. Despite the continued attention that information systems scholars have directed to studies on affordances and social media, there seems to be limited discussion on the negative, disruptive effects that social media could have on accomplishment of illness management goals. Accordingly, the authors argue that social media affordances could have both positive, enabling effects on illness management outcomes or negative, disruptive effects.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Social media technologies have had a considerable impact on society acting as platforms for activism; support for new business models and, to organize people around common causes such as health (McKenna et al. 2017; Rozenblum and Bates 2013; Urquhart and Vaast 2012). Accordingly, today a growing number of chronically ill adults make use of social media technologies to better understand and manage their illness. Digital technologies such as social media and other technological innovations could assist the healthcare sector by empowering people to take control of their illnesses. It is suggested that the use of digital tools such as social media may lead to decreased costs and administrative effort for care delivery, increasing practice efficiency and supporting patient self-management (Agarwal et al. 2010).

It appears that prior studies conducted on social media use for health are focused on motivation mechanisms, i.e. influences on health-related outcomes in these settings and have overlooked the processes of appropriation of Social Media Tools (SMT) within the public context to manage one's health and wellbeing (Agarwal et al. 2010; Fichman et al. 2011; Merolli et al. 2013). To this effect, there has been limited empirical investigation into how SMTs are utilized by these individuals to better understand and manage their chronic illness. Hence, it is necessary to further explore how social media tools are used to gain a more in-depth insight into potential benefits or drawbacks of these tools in the context of chronic illness self-management.

Affordance theory was proposed in the field of ecological psychology to address the “action possibilities” offered to an animal by its environment (Fayard and Weeks 2014; Gibson 1986). This seminal theory has been adopted in several fields including Information Systems (IS) to understand the relationship between an IT artefact and its users within a specified use context (Anderson and Robey 2017; Orlikowski et al. 2006).

Accordingly, the purpose of this chapter is to examine the affordances of social media which enable or deter illness management for chronically ill adults. Consequently, the guiding research question is: *How do social media technology features enable or disrupt chronic illness management practices of chronically ill adults?*

To address the research question, the authors conducted a multiple case study to analyse enabling and disruptive affordances of four different SMTs having a range of features. This study presented in this chapter forms part of a larger research project that investigates the appropriation of social media tools by adults with chronic illness. The larger study applied a multiple case study with mixed methods and also examines influences and processes of appropriation across the selected SMT tools: Reddit (text-based), Instagram (Photo-based/hybrid), Youtube (video-based/hybrid) and Facebook (hybrid).

The remainder of this chapter proceeds as follows: the next section gives an overview of related studies on the use of social media tools, followed by the chosen research approach, data collection protocol, data analysis and findings. Finally, we wrap up by discussing our findings and drawing theoretical and practical implications.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Social Media Tools (SMTs) are commonly defined as: “a group of Internet-based technologies that allows users to easily create, edit, evaluate and link to content or other creators of content” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Kietzmann et al. 2011). Several terms are used in the literature to describe SMTs

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